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AUTHOR Jambor, Tom
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ABSTRACT

Advocates of children's right to play are caught between the need to provide developmentally appropriate and challenging places for play and restrictions that result from fears of liability. It may be that implementation of the suggestions of research on playground safety has resulted in the creation of playgrounds that are colorful, cute, and costly, but do not complement children's developmental needs. When children find a playground unchallenging and boring, they may seek out risk and challenge elsewhere. Usually the prospects of negative consequences of play are enhanced in these other places. It is the responsibility of children's protectors and caregivers to provide places for play that are both safe and developmentally appropriate. (BC)

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A Perspective on U.S. Playground Safety

Standards and Children's Play Needs

by

Dr. Tom Jambor
Associate Professor of Early Childhood Development
School of Education
University of Alabama at Birmingham
President and National Representative, IPA/USA -
The USA Affiliate of the International Assoc. for the Child's Right to Play

at

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Playgrounds in America bring to mind two very distinct and opposing visions:

One of creative planning, developmental design and challenging play opportunities,

and

One of token efforts, boring design, restricted play challenges, danger and liability.

Over the past few years playground safety has been a major issue for IPA/USA. And for good reason! Each year in the United States nearly 200,000 children are injured seriously enough on playgrounds to warrant medical attention. Approximately 79% of all these injuries are the result of falls and impacts. About 1/2 cause head and neck injuries, with an average of one child death every month.

But, as advocates for the Child's Right to Play, are we beginning to be caught between "a rock and a hard place"? That is, are we being caught between what is known to be developmentally appropriate and challenging to meet children's continually changing play needs, and the attitudes of restriction imposed by adults (as well meaning as they might be) whose judgement may be strongly influenced by liability fears or paranoia.

There has, of course, been on-going research, opinion and subsequent guidelines produced to make playgrounds safer. The American Society for Testing and Materials and the United States Consumer Products Safety Commission have been National forces, revising playground guidelines even as I speak. The production of texts that emphasis playground safety from the American Association for Leisure and Recreation Committee on Play, P.L.A.E., Inc., publications like my Playground Safety Manual, inventions to measure safety (Paul

Hogan), accident and injury prevention newsletters, as well as numerous articles in newspapers, magazines and journals, presentations and video productions have come on strong during the past several years. All of which involve, one way or another, IPA/USA members.

From all fronts there is no argument against accident and injury prevention. Great attention certainly needs to be given to ground cover, structure height/spacing/movement, protrusions and entrapments if we are to drastically reduce the incidence and severity of accident and injury.

But, can there be argument as to the degree of restrictiveness put on children's play as a result of a spiraling ascent of recommended playground standards? While standards are important to children's safety, are they also beginning to generate playgrounds that are only colorful and cute (and usually costly), rather than ones that are challenging and complementary to children's development needs and the natural environment?

IPA/USA playground designer Jay Beckworth said that "the goal of playground safety is not to remove excitement and challenge, but rather to control hazards".

The question I pose is, within itself, a challenge to us:

> "Can playgrounds that meet all children's developmental needs, and playgrounds that adhere to given safety standards, coexist"?

We know all too well that children are explorers of their limitations, and, therefore, seek higher levels of challenge to promote and enhance their repertoire of skills and competencies.

It could very well be that in our drive to "accident-proof" a playground we may be creating an environment conducive to unwanted challenge. That is, when we make a playground too safe and too restrictive for use, children usually find it unchallenging and boring. Consequentially they may reject it and actively seek out risk and challenge situations elsewhere. And, these places are usually places where the prospect and probability of serious, negative consequences are enhanced.

As IPA/USA colleague Brian Sutton-Smith so simply put it: "Access to challenge is fundamental to human development".

As our children's protector and caregiver it is indeed our responsibility to provide a safe as well as a developmentally appropriate environment in which to play.

But, how far do we go in lording over the safety of our children? How far is too far in restricting children's play needs on our playgrounds? When do playground safety standards start restricting the developmental value of the play environment to the point where children are no longer interested... and it becomes just another monument to good adult intentions rejected by children.

How can we keep from becoming stuck between "a rock and a hard place"?